



Nigeria – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 22 October 2010

Information on the following:

- 1. The similarities (if any) between Urhobo (alternatively “Sobo”) and Itsekiri (alt. “Isekiri”; “Ishekiri”; etc.) language;**
- 2. The similarities (if any) between Urhobo and Itsekiri ethnicities/cultures/customs;**
- 3. The distribution of Urhobo and Itsekiri populations; including whether these groups live in the same towns/regions of Nigeria;**
- 4. Whether there is any information on whether Itsekiri speakers can or do speak Urhobo, and vice versa.**
- 5. Whether there is conflict/co-operation between Urhobo and Itsekiri people (groups or individuals), and to what extent.**

A page on the *Delta State Tourism* website states:

“There are five ethnic groups in Delta State, namely Anioma, Ijaw, Isoko, Itsekiri and Urhobo. Deltans speak a variety of languages and dialects but have nearly identical customs, culture and occupations. These are easily identified in the courts of most traditional rulers across the state.” (Delta State Tourism (undated) *Delta State: The Big Heart*)

An entry on the Urhobo in *The Peoples of Africa – An Ethnohistorical Dictionary* states:

“The Urhobo (Urhobo, Biotu, and the pejorative Sobo) people live in Bendel State in Nigeria, primarily in the Western and Eastern Urhobo divisions. They are closely related to the neighboring Edo people.” (Olson, James S. (1996) *The Peoples of Africa – An Ethnohistorical Dictionary*. Westport, Greenwood Press. p.578)

A page on the *Urhobo Association of New York, New Jersey & Connecticut* website, in a paragraph headed “People”, states:

“The Urhobo people are located in the present Delta State of Nigeria. They occupy the southern portion of the Benin lowland and the floodplains and swamps of the petroleum-rich Niger delta. With a population of some two million people, the Urhobo people are the 5th largest ethnic group in Nigeria and constitute the largest single ethnic group in Delta

State.” (Urhobo Association of New York, New Jersey & Connecticut (undated) *The Urhobo People*)

An entry on the Itsekiris in *The Peoples of Africa – An Ethnohistorical Dictionary* states:

“The Itsekiris (Isekivi, Ishekiris, Shekiris, Chekiris, Jekois, Ijekiris, Jekiris, Ichakiris, Iweres, Irhobos, Warris, and Iselema-Otus) are an ethnic group living today on the western side of the Niger River delta in Bendel State in Nigeria. They are concentrated in the Warri and West Benin divisions...Today, the Itsekiris speak a Yoruba dialect.”

A page on the *Ugbajo Itsekiri USA, Inc* website states:

“The Itsekiri are a peculiar and unique people in the Nigerian Niger delta. They have inhabited their homeland, which now constitutes the three Warri Local Government Areas of Delta State, Nigeria, for centuries.” (Ugbajo Itsekiri USA, Inc (21 October 2010) *Who Are The Itsekiri?*)

In a section titled “The Warri crisis over oil (section 2.1.5) an *Amnesty International* report states:

“Violence in the Warri area has escalated significantly since 1997, and particularly in the last two years. The cosmopolitan town of Warri has grown in significance, size and population since the discovery of oil. Competition for control of local government in the town and attendant royalties from oil companies, jobs and contracts has exacerbated tensions between Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo populations. Itsekiri dominance of the region goes back to their privileged position with European traders as middlemen in the trade in slaves and later palm oil. The Itsekiris date their claim to Warri from the 15th century and cite court judgments including from the Privy Council, a final Court of Appeal under UK colonial rule. In 1936 they declared the Olu (king) of Itsekiri to be the Olu of Warri, a claim recognized by the colonial government in the 1950s. After the discovery of oil, companies reached agreements with the Olu of Warri, depriving other communities of benefits. The Ijaws and Urhobos say that some local court judgments in the dispute were obtained fraudulently, and that they have lived in Warri as long as the Itsekiris. In 1996 the local military administration created a new local government area, Warri Southwest, with its headquarters in Ogbe Ijoh, an Ijaw town. The subsequent overturning of this decision by the federal military government, which moved the headquarters to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town, provoked riots. In 2003, over 500 Itsekiris and several hundred Ijaws died as conflict returned.” (Amnesty International (November 2005) *Ten years on: Injustice and violence haunt the oil Delta*)

In a section titled “Delta State: The Ownership Controversy in Warri” a *Human Rights Watch* report states:

“In and around Warri, the Niger Delta’s broader problems have become inextricably bound up with a long-running controversy over who the “true indigenes” of the city are. Warri is home to three different ethnic groups that each claim to be the town’s true ‘owners’—the Ijaw, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo, and each has compiled elaborately detailed treatises detailing their historical and demographic claims upon the place. Each group has made some attempt to claim that they were the first to settle the area, and each group has made claims about their demographic strength that are rejected by their

neighbors.” (Human Rights Watch (25 April 2006) *"They Do Not Own This Place": Government Discrimination Against "Non-Indigenes" in Nigeria*, p.55)

This section of the report also states:

“Only the Itsekiri have been successful in asserting their claim to be the true indigenes of Warri. All three of Warri’s Local Government Areas are run by predominantly Itsekiri administrations and Warri’s representative in the federal National Assembly is also an Itsekiri, a fact that the town’s Urhobo and Ijaw residents believe has resulted in the economic and political marginalization of their communities.” (ibid, p.55)

This section of the report refers to intercommunal violence in Warri as follows:

“Since 1997 Warri’s ‘ownership’ controversy has given rise to a series of intercommunal clashes that have claimed hundreds of lives. In 1997 hundreds of people were killed in clashes sparked by the creation of a new LGA, Warri Southwest; the location of its headquarters, and the swearing-in of local officials to that LGA administration, helped spark renewed fighting in 1999. In the last large-scale outbreak of violence, in 2003, several hundred people were killed over the course of several months in clashes triggered initially by a dispute over the delineation of electoral wards in Warri. At the time of Human Rights Watch’s last visit to Warri in December 2005, a fragile peace was in place, but many community and youth leaders on all sides felt that it could not be expected to hold unless the issue of ownership was resolved to their group’s satisfaction.” (ibid, pp.55-56)

This report refers to perceived Urhobo grievances as follows:

“All three of Warri’s local government areas are under predominantly Itsekiri administrations. The Urhobo and Ijaw youth leaders interviewed by Human Rights Watch were unanimous in their belief that these local governments systematically exclude their communities from access to jobs, educational opportunities, and even basic government services, choosing instead to lavish all of their resources upon ethnic Itsekiri.” (ibid, p.56)

In a section titled “Background” a *Human Rights Watch* report states:

“Since before Nigeria’s independence in 1960 there have been tensions surrounding the arrangements for the government of the region surrounding Warri, the second most important oil town in Nigeria after Port Harcourt. Warri itself, the largest town (though not the capital) of Delta State, is claimed as their homeland by three ethnic groups: the Itsekiri, the Urhobo, and the Ijaw. The Itsekiri, a small ethnic group of a few hundred thousand people whose language is related to Yoruba (one of Nigeria’s largest ethnic groups), also live in villages spread out along the Benin and Escravos Rivers into the mangrove forest riverine areas towards the Atlantic Ocean. The Urhobo, a much larger group numbering some millions related to the Edo-speaking people of Benin City, live in Warri town and to the north, on land.” (Human Rights Watch (17 December 2003) *The Warri Crisis: Fueling Violence*, p.3)

In a section titled “Violence in 2003” this report states:

“The latest round of violence began in early 2003, during the lead up to state and federal elections held in April and May (local government elections have still not been held anywhere in Nigeria since 1999). On the weekend of January 31 / February 1, there was fighting in the Okere district of Warri town between Itsekiris and Urhobos, during primaries being held for the Delta South senatorial district by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the incumbent party in both Delta State and at federal level. The dispute centered on the number of wards making up the district, and the boundaries between the wards, which Urhobos alleged disadvantaged them. According to local accounts and press reports, Urhobo youths attacked an Itsekiri area on the afternoon of January 31, and began to loot and burn property. Itsekiri youth collected at the stadium where the primary voting was taking place then retaliated in response to reports of this raid. Over the next couple of days most of a large estate belonging to Chief Benjamin Okumagba, the traditional ruler of the Urhobo in Warri, was destroyed. Government soldiers intervened during the initial Urhobo attack on the Itsekiri neighborhood, and one soldier was reportedly killed in this confrontation. Urhobo witnesses to the events alleged that soldiers patrolling the Okumagba estate were withdrawn before the Itsekiri attack. There were other reports of random shooting or executions by the armed forces during efforts to quell the fighting. Estimates of the number of dead over the few days of violence ranged from twelve to two hundred. The Nigerian Red Cross reported that more than 6,000 people had been displaced.” (ibid, pp.5-6)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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